

Under the influence

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

Many moons ago bad meant good and Sonic and Mario were at each other's throats vying for supremacy in a rapidly evolving brave new world of gaming. One TV show lead the way in tracking the developments, gift-wrapping the information we craved in an energetic and entertaining magazine-style format and beaming it to our hulking CRT telly boxes.



The ill-fated Bad Influence magazine that only ran to two issues.

Bad Influence, the early-nineties technology and gaming TV show presented by Violet Berlin and Andy Crane is available on YouTube in all its transferred-from-creaky-old-VHS-tape glory. The show featured a rapid-cut blend of news concerning the latest technology fads (and a handful of evolutionary developments that actually came to pass), games reviews conducted mostly by kids, and a tips and cheats segment woven into an awful PG-13 version of a Young Ones sketch.

The 'Datablast' at the end of each show was a notable inclusion for the first three series. This was a novel way of presenting reams of information to viewers in a thirty second burst. While it would whizz by far too fast to be read by the human eye, it could be accessed by recording the show and

reviewing the pages at your leisure using the freeze frame button on your remote. I suppose they could just have had their own Teletext channel, but then that wouldn't have made kids feel like they were tapping into surreptitious, leaked data, CIA style. More like your dad looking for a cheap holiday.

As patronising as it could be, when this and GamesMaster were all we had to choose from, school kids across the nation lapped it up and were bereft when each of its four series came to a close. Nevertheless that didn't stop me fast-forwarding through Nam Rood's toe-curling broadcast-from-the-shed/basement vignette each week. If I missed a cheat for a game I owned, so be it; I could find the same information in the 'Datablast' at the end with a generous dollop of skim-reading and patience.

Nam Rood is 'door man' spelt backwards in case you hadn't spotted that; the idea was that he was broadcasting 'backdoor' cheats via a pirate TV station. The joke was as tenuous and irksome as his persona, which was something akin to a fusion of Vyvyan and Rick from *The Young Ones*.

Finding himself in a differently contrived, sitcom-esque scenario each time, he would open his segment greeting viewers alternately as 'scrotty' or 'slimy furtlers' and relay cheat codes by writing them on self-adhesive cue cards, which he would slap onto his forehead. He was essentially Jar Jar Binks long before he was a twinkle in George Lucas's warped imagination.

Nam Rood's character was canned at the end of the third series following market research revealing that female viewers didn't like him. Two questions suddenly spring to mind; why wait until the show was three quarters of the way through its run to ask the question?, and who were the boys that did like him?

To be fair to Andy Wear who played Nam Rood (he *was* a scripted caricature thank god!), it was producer, Patrick Titley, who devised the part and wrote Andy's lines. Now he should be shot. Andy Wear went on to do theatre work and continues to act to this day (he now appears in Emmerdale) despite his career-crippling performances in Bad Influence. Try saying that about Jar Jar Binks, who was unceremoniously encased in carbonite and sunk to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean (probably). If Patrick isn't "mesa sorry", he bloody well *should* be.



Andy Wear (on the right) minus Nam Rood's perma-scowl!

Perhaps the best thing about Bad Influence is that it focused quite heavily (at least in the first series) on home computers like the Amiga, which as you know, I'm a tad fond of. Despite Commodore's penetration in America, the Amiga was much more of a European phenomenon, and even here it was still considered a bit niche, languishing in the shadows of SEGA's

Mega Drive and Nintendo's SNES. Although GamesMaster co-existed with (and outlived) Bad Influence, it definitely didn't do justice to the home computers given its proclivity for sexier console gaming.



It's difficult to see how Bad Influence *wouldn't* have been a success. As Andy Crane put it in the inaugural episode, it's "the only place you'll be able to see *moving* screenshots of the very latest games. Check this out, Streets of Rage 2", as he opened the show before several dozen TVs wedged together to form a single cinema-sized screen known as a video wall. That was it in a nutshell; at the time all we had to base our opinions on were static pictures in magazines. There was no YouTube and the likes of GamesMaster and Bad

Influence were the first (and pretty much last) shows of their ilk.

Although Andy Crane wasn't much of a gamer, he was an affable, and already established (see partnership with Edd the Duck), enthusiastic TV personality. Together with Violet Berlin, who provided the inside knowledge and geek-factor, they were a great team who genuinely seemed to like each other.



*Andy Crane, Edd the Duck and The Broom Cupboard...
sounds like a CS Lewis spin-off!*

Z Wright (that's his real name!) was a child actor drafted in to report on stateside tech advances, and like Andy, was more of a presenter than a field expert. As with the studio-

based segments, his forays into tomorrow's world played a lot like This Week In Robots or This Week In Virtual Reality, and more often than not, the predictions fell well wide of the mark. Twenty two years later and neither of these technologies feature very strongly in the lives of the average consumer. I did, however, enjoy his report on early modems and how the 'information superhighway' - as we referred to it back then - would transform the world... bang on the money that one, and a real trip down memory lane for me considering I was there when it was taking off.

It wasn't just computer nerds who were attracted to the show. The producers did a fantastic job booking big-name celebrity guest appearances who would put products through their paces and endorse them, helping to widen the appeal of the show, and bolster its street cred. Amongst the most noteworthy were Take That, The Shaman, Craig McLachlan, some of the cast of Gladiators and Donna Air. Panning to the late Richard Whiteley playing the Countdown game, and Andy asking him if he was enjoying it without mentioning the fact that he hosts the TV show was a particularly surreal moment for me. He must have had less than ten seconds of screen time as though he was any other random member of the public. Pure genius!



Violet guest-writes for Teletext games magazine, Digitiser.

Series four marked a drastic overhaul of the format. Violet moved overseas to take care of the 'on location' reporting, Z and Nam were dropped, and Sonya Saul became Andy's new co-host. The new, grown-up feel was a welcome switch, but the chemistry between Sonya and Andy was never quite right, despite Sonya being an acclaimed presenter who cut her teeth on stints with MTV. She went on to act in several household-name TV shows, though is now working as a barrister.

Season four's finale concluded with no reference to it being the last, or the return of a fifth series so possibly the cast and

crew knew this was the show's swan song, or the decision had yet to be made at that stage.

Watching four years' worth of Bad Influence episodes like a box set junkie, it's staggering to see how quickly technology evolved in that short space of time, perhaps more so than any computer gaming era before or since. Series one featured Amigas and Atari STs with a few deferential nods towards the Commodore 64 and Spectrum, which were just about hanging on by the skin of their teeth, though already looking decidedly creaky and arcane next to their 16 bit successors.



By the second series the SNES and Mega Drive had largely shunted the home computers aside, and remained prominent stalwarts throughout the lifespan of the show even when superseded by more advanced technology. Before you know it, the 32 bit systems are hitting the market, though never really gain much of a foothold because the 64 bit ones arrive

hot on their heels. Blink again and the 'super consoles' such as the Sony PlayStation 1 and Panasonic 3DO emerge sending gaming aficionados into a slathering frenzy.

When the potential to have access to the internet at home or school became a reality, the Bad Influence web site was born and the Datablast laid to rest. Violet and Andy stopped encouraging people to write in to the show using those funny, archaic pen things; instead they referred to something called an email address, which consisted of a long-winded series of random numbers, an @ symbol and a server address. Online video as we know it today was still a pipe-dream, but static images strung together to give the impression of movement showed the way forward.

When Bad Influence and GamesMaster were consigned to the past, gaming on mainstream TV channels pretty much faded away with them, and the advent of the YouTube era means this is unlikely to change any time soon. What's interesting is that as game production budgets have ballooned exponentially, investment in TV shows representing the industry has dwindled to the extent where some of the best content is now being produced by enthusiasts with an amateur video camera broadcasting from their bedrooms. There's freely available HD-quality footage for every obscure, redundant and long forgotten system ever produced; we've never had it so good, and yet somehow we've lost something along the way.

I challenge you to journey back to this bygone epoch, watch just one episode and leave it at that. Let me know how you get on, and share your memories below.